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Diversifying the Playing Field: Solo Performance of African American Spirituals and Art Songs by Voice Students from All Racial Backgrounds

Emery Stephens and Caroline Helton



Emery Stephens



Caroline Helton

Whether singing or acting, race and color prejudices are forgotten.
Art is one form against which such barriers do not stand.
(Paul Robeson)

INTRODUCTION

TO FURTHER PROMOTE THE PERFORMANCE of African American spirituals and art songs, this article offers a different perspective—direct response from collegiate voice students, voice teachers, vocal coaches, and professional singers. In the spring of 2005, “The African American Art Song Survey” was developed and disseminated through the Internet to collect data from 220 voice teachers, coaches, and singers regarding their attitudes on performing African American classical vocal repertoire across racial backgrounds, receiving a response rate of 44% from 500 distributed surveys. Part I dealt with general demographic questions (gender, age, ethnic background, religious affiliation), and Part II addressed specific questions about musical training and exposure to art songs and spirituals by African Americans. Part III dealt with preferences of vocal performance style, and Part IV posed two questions regarding attitudes toward the performance of this repertoire by singers of all racial backgrounds (i.e., questions regarding perceptions of authenticity), in which the respondents were invited to explain their ratings with comments.

Approximately one-quarter of the respondents were African American and three-quarters Caucasian, and three-quarters of the respondents have at least one degree in music. Further, sixty percent of the respondents identified themselves as voice teachers and professional singers, and around thirty percent as voice students. More than sixty percent said that they had never received any instruction on singing African American art songs or spirituals in their private or institutional voice studio, but almost eighty-seven percent said they desired to perform this literature.

Following a poster presentation at the Sixth International Congress of Voice Teachers Conference (Vancouver, 2005), research survey findings

were delivered with University of Michigan colleague, Dr. Caroline Helton, at the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Conference (District of Columbia, 2006) and the African American Art Song Alliance Conference (University of California-Irvine, 2007). In addition, the project was highlighted in a collaborative article, "Singing Down the Barriers: Encouraging Singers of All Racial Backgrounds to Perform Music by African American Composers," published by Jossey-Bass for one of its academic journals, *Scholarship of Multicultural Teaching and Learning*.¹

BACKGROUND

Although a number of festivals in this country are devoted to art song performance, the works of African American composers are rarely, if ever, considered for performance. One is given the impression that this repertoire is either unavailable or unworthy of performance.² Because of this initial exclusion, these works never gained entrance into the traditional canon in higher education and beyond. The current sensitivity to race in the performance of art songs and spirituals by African American composers stems from our nation's history of slavery on the one hand and the legacy of nineteenth century minstrelsy and its stereotyping and mocking of African Americans on the other. These historical accounts continue to challenge most singers, but performing art songs and spirituals by African Americans could provide a means of exploring and defusing the racial sensitivity that we feel today.³

A variety of factors feed this dilemma: an unwillingness to offend black audiences by white performers in particular; desires for African American singers not to be stereotyped by performing spirituals; ignorance from lack of exposure to the repertoire; inexperience with performance practice; and questions of "ownership." Because spirituals were adopted and sung by slaves during their daily activities (work, ceremonies, religious gatherings), these pieces are thus intimately connected to the history of slavery in the United States.⁴

The idea for this research project developed in a doctoral seminar taught by Dr. Helton, a white faculty member at the University of Michigan. In a presentation on the performance practice of singing African American spirituals, I concluded by encouraging my

vocal colleagues (all white except for one Asian student) to study and program them on their upcoming recitals. To my surprise, the halting reply was "We can't because we're not black," to which I replied, "Why not?" Thus began our work to address four key questions:

1. What are the barriers that singers from all racial backgrounds face when performing art songs and spirituals by African American composers?
2. How do students and teachers confront their preconceptions when learning any piece of music (e.g., a female student singing a song from a man's perspective)? Specifically, what must we do to incorporate learning spirituals and art songs by African Americans?
3. How is a singer's outlook on racial dynamics affected by studying and performing these pieces?
4. What do we need to do as educators to enable singers from all racial backgrounds to become more comfortable performing this repertoire?

QUANTIFIABLE DATA

Out of the 220 respondents on the African American Art Song Survey entitled, "Beyond Race: The Universality of Singing African American Art Songs and Spirituals," 86 (39.1%) were male and 134 (60.9%) were female. Age ranges are shown in Table 1; Table 2 shows the racial breakdown of the 220 respondents.

Some survey respondents reported that they were very comfortable singing spirituals because of their

TABLE 1.

Age Range	Response Percentage	Total Respondents
18–35	49.6%	109
36–50	22.7%	50
50+	27.7%	61

TABLE 2.

Race	Response Total
North American Indian or First Nation	1
Asian or Pacific Islander	3
Black or African American	48
Latino/a	3
White	160
Multiracial	5

upbringing in the South; however, other respondents believe that a person of color brings a unique timbre and interpretation to the performance of this repertoire. Responses to the question about challenges to performing this repertoire broke down into four categories. Although roughly a quarter of the responses referenced fears of inauthenticity or needing permission to perform the repertoire, another quarter cited lack of availability or knowledge about where to find repertoire. A slightly greater number of respondents felt that they lacked sufficient stylistic knowledge or guidance to interpret correctly and respectfully, and a small number of singers cited ignorance (from the general public or colleagues, or their own musical shortcomings) as a barrier.

The survey also asked about the extent to which a performer's race contributes to the authenticity of his or her performance of this repertoire. Approximately twenty-five percent of the respondents felt that race greatly contributed to perceptions of authenticity, while sixty-two percent rated the contribution moderate, and thirteen percent felt that the race of the performer did not play any role at all. When asked to explain their rating, responses indicating that race played a major role came from African Americans, who felt a strong sense of ownership of the repertoire,

"I think that at this point race plays a major part in the authenticity of singing African American art songs, simply because many teachers of other races have not taken the time to know this material well enough to teach students how to approach them with understanding and appreciation for the history behind them."

and non-African Americans, who assumed that audiences wouldn't accept them.

"I think African Americans can sing these types of songs more authentically, and I feel like I don't have as much of a right to perform this type of music because I'm not black. But I think if more singers of all races were to sing this type of material, it would become more widely accepted."

The majority of respondents, however, felt that singers of all racial backgrounds must actively work to connect to the literature they sing. They said that it might be easier for some African American singers, who have had certain experiences to connect to the repertoire, but that does not rule out the responsibility borne by any singer

to create an authentic and committed performance; in other words, race alone does not bestow authenticity on the singer. Respondents observed, "It's not so much race as it is the level of familiarity with the style," and "A good understanding of the history of African American art songs, the text of the song, and how to properly sing it is necessary, and these factors have nothing to do with race."

In fact, when asked how comfortable they would be if singers of all races performed this repertoire, virtually all the respondents (ninety-nine percent) reported a high or moderate level of comfort. In response to open-ended questions, two singers spoke eloquently of the possibility for cross-cultural awareness:

"As a fellow African American, it is my duty, and the duty of other African Americans, to continue performing the songs of our past to others. I believe that is very important to do; however, when people of other races sing these wonderful songs the message of continuing the story is extended to a greater family of people, beyond race."

"I do not believe that music has a soul, but it does leave the imprints of people's spirits and communicates on a deeper level than our verbal language can ever begin to communicate."

QUALITATIVE DATA

The highest number of responses cited the availability of repertoire and recordings, lack of knowledge of performance practice (dialect and style), fear of inauthenticity, and questions of ownership. However, a collective group of responses centered around the following key factors:

- fear of inauthenticity;
- questions of ownership;
- history of racism;
- discomfort with minstrelsy tradition;
- expectations (how will others perceive me singing this repertoire?);
- cultural conflicts;
- lack of exposure to spiritual or gospel tradition;
- lack of knowledge of performance practice (dialect and style).

To offset the many barriers articulated by the respondents, we believe there are many pedagogic benefits that students and teachers alike will learn through this repertoire. They include classical and popular musical

idioms, complex vocal technique (i.e., offbeat melodic phrases, blues notes, hums, additive rhythms and poly-rhythms), interdisciplinary connections to African American culture and experience, and diversity issues.

In the survey many African American singers said (to paraphrase), “If I can sing from a nineteenth century white German man’s point of view, why can’t a white person sing from a slave’s point of view?” At the University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre & Dance, Dr. Helton led a small but diverse focus group of undergraduate students to do just that. The group consisted of two white female singers, two white male singers, and one black male singer, who first answered a series of questions about their backgrounds and their expectations and opinions of and previous exposure to art songs and spirituals by African Americans. With the help of their studio teachers as well as a course regularly offered at our university on the song literature of African Americans, the students explored their chosen repertoire. Some of them had guidance from African American professors, and some students worked independently. At the focus group discussion, many of them remarked on their artistic exploration.

“I was glad to have the opportunity to perform this repertoire with permission, because I’ve only ever seen black singers perform it and I’ve always wanted to be able to.”

“You need to understand the struggle and some of African American history and know how each song relates to the struggle. Each story is told from a different perspective.”

“[This music] is powerful because the music is still here, still meaningful and not removed from our cultural experience. Everyone can relate. Music is about the universality of experience.”

“[I gained the most insight] when I did my first mock performance—after the music was learned and memorized—and I was making choices about how I was going to make people believe me. I thought that, since I’m African American, my connection would be automatic, but my insight came through real performance.”

All these singers were struck by the strong emotional content of the pieces and the music’s unique ability to convey the universality of experience. Since African American spirituals are a part of the cultural fabric of America, these songs will forever document the

resilience of a people who fought for freedom against the social, political, and geographical injustices of a democratic society.

MASTER CLASSES: THEORIES PUT INTO PRACTICE

When we first published the results of this survey, it was our intention to continue our research by presenting lecture-recitals and master classes at a variety of colleges and universities in order to get more feedback about perceptions of crossing the color barrier while performing art songs and spirituals by African American composers. We were, in fact, able to visit three state universities with very different student demographics, and with participation from the faculty of these universities, we performed a program designed to elucidate the history of this repertoire. We then conducted master classes with student singers, as well as visited classrooms, where we held discussions about the poetry, history, and performance practice of the repertoire. Our experiences were, not surprisingly, varied but also quite encouraging.

The first university was in the Midwest, and the faculty and students were all white and from a non-urban (i.e., suburban or rural) background. Here we were met with a uniform attitude of “Teach me, I want to learn and explore.” This complete lack of self-consciousness on the part of the students was due, in part, we believe, to the homogeneity of the student population and the leadership of the faculty by example, which created a safe atmosphere for student exploration. We feel that in this setting there are truly no barriers or taboos for the students if the faculty are willing to take the lead by performing and assigning pieces from this repertoire to their students.

The second university was also in the Midwest, but the student population we worked with was pretty evenly divided between black and white singers, and they were mostly from urban areas. The faculty demographic mirrored the diversity of the students, with two white and two African American voice professors. In this setting, the students were very open and well informed; perhaps due to the level of cultural diversity the student body experiences as a matter of daily life, it seemed as if these students were much more aware of the complexity surrounding our topic. In this instance we led

a panel discussion that included the performers as well as audience members, and the participants spoke with great passion, insight, and nuance about their experiences learning, performing, and hearing the repertoire. With a white performer, for example, we asked such questions as, "How did you deal with your comfort level when performing a race-specific text?" The student, who had performed a setting of the Langston Hughes poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," spoke at length of his thoughtful preparation and analysis of the text and his deliberate performance choices as well as his reluctance (stemming from his desire to avoid offending African American audience members) to sing in the dialect of the poem. We also asked the African American participants whether they had a natural connection to the pieces they were singing or whether they had to forge a new relationship in their performance preparations, and the answer from students singing both art songs and spirituals was that they had to work to make the pieces their own. Their challenge was to overcome racially-based assumptions on the part of the audience by forging their own personal relationship to their pieces, and they felt very aware of the responsibility of demonstrating the skills of classical singing and interpretation in performance that they had worked hard to acquire in their studies. There were moments of humor and release as the participants spoke openly of race, and during the discussion they were unfailingly supportive of each other. In the end, the group concluded that the emotional truths of music and poetry were universal, and that conveying those truths was much more important than the singer's outward appearance or perceived cultural background.

Whereas we feel this kind of work can be done in any setting and produce positive results, both of us found the experience that includes invested and diverse faculty as well as students to be extremely deep and gratifying. Since this master class was well attended, we took the opportunity to videotape the performances as well as the panel discussion, and we have posted the panel discussion on the Internet, which the reader is invited to view by visiting the YouTube link (<http://youtu.be/Mb2j4ZfRwMs>).

The third university was in the deep South, also with a fairly evenly divided racial mix, but the students were primarily from non-urban communities here as well. The students in this location also were very willing to

engage in the conversation we were facilitating, but they were much less sophisticated than the students at our second university in terms of grasping cultural and artistic nuances. Whereas the student body was diverse, the faculty at this university were all white, and they demonstrated a general unwillingness to really probe the issue of crossing the color barrier in performance with their students. The performances and the master classes were poorly attended, and the students performed pieces that were not race specific. In the case of the master class, we feel that the combination of a still complex culture surrounding race relations in the deep South with a reluctance on the part of faculty to promote or even broach the issues we were discussing presented barriers that we hadn't previously experienced.

We had more success, however, when on the following day we were able to perform for and lead a discussion with a large group of students in a music appreciation class. The classroom teacher had spent time laying the groundwork for our visit, and we found them to be thoughtful and willing participants in the project. Professor Stephens, who is African American, performed H.T. Burleigh's setting of the Walt Whitman poem, "Ethiopia Saluting the Colors" (in which the singer speaks from the different perspectives of a white Union soldier and an old female slave), and then discussed comparisons of crossing gender barriers with crossing racial barriers when performing. We also led an exercise where we asked the students to close their eyes while they listened to Professor Helton performing Hall Johnson's setting of the African American spiritual, "City Called Heaven," after which we talked about whether knowing that Professor Helton is white affected their response to the performance. The students demonstrated knowledge of the poets and of the historical events surrounding the Civil War as well as the history of minstrelsy, and actively engaged in the discussion of our topic, which leads us to believe that if the faculty lead, even where there is a recent history of painful racial tension, the students are ready to follow.

CONCLUSION

Performing recital repertoire of art songs and spirituals by African American composers can be a wonderfully useful way for singers to confront their own preconcep-

tions around race and performance practice. There is no better place to attempt this task than in our colleges and universities, where teachers can guide and students explore, pushing beyond the boundaries of their cultural assumptions in a safe environment in which discussion of difficult topics is part of the process of their education as artists and citizens of the world.

What do we need to do as educators to enable singers from all racial backgrounds to become more comfortable performing this repertoire? First, voice teachers must convey the message that all students have “permission” to perform this repertoire. Second, to guide students toward committed, informed performances, we need to familiarize ourselves with the body of song literature and its proper performance practice.⁵ Third, we need to assign these pieces to students as part of their regular diet of quality music that is good for their voices and their development as artists. Fourth, we can program these songs in our own recitals so that our students can experience a live example of how it’s done. Finally, we ought to follow up by talking to students about their experiences of singing these songs, which is easy to do in one-on-one studio teaching.

NOTES

1. Caroline Helton and Emery Stephens, “Singing Down the Barriers: Encouraging Singers of All Racial Backgrounds to Perform Music by African American Composers,” in Marilla D. Svinicki et al., eds., *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* (Somerset, NJ: Wiley Periodicals, 2007), 73–79.
2. Darryl Taylor, “The Importance of Studying African American Art Song,” *Journal of Singing* 54, no. 3 (January/February 1998): 9–16.
3. Lourin Plant, “Singing African American Spirituals: A Reflection on Racial Barriers in Classical Vocal Music,” *Journal of Singing* 61, no. 5 (May/June 2005): 451–468.
4. Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1971).
5. Helton and Stephens; Plant; Barbara Steinhaus-Jordan, “Black Spiritual Art Song: Interpretive Guidelines for Studio Teachers,” *Journal of Singing* 61, no. 5 (May/June 2005): 477–485.

Emery Stephens, baritone, is an Assistant Professor of Voice at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. He holds degrees from Gordon College, Boston University, and a Doctor of Musical Arts from the University of Michigan. Praised for his singing “with ringing suavity and articulate intelligence (*The Boston Phoenix*), Dr. Stephens has performed

with Boston Lyric Opera, Opera New England, Arbor Opera Theater, Carolina Ballet with the North Carolina Symphony, Orchestra Canton, Prism Opera, Handel and Haydn Society, and Wilmington Symphony Orchestra, among others.

In addition to performance opportunities, Stephens held teaching appointments at the University of Michigan (graduate student instructor), Eastern Michigan University, Concordia University-Ann Arbor, University of North Carolina-Wilmington, and the Buckingham Browne and Nichols School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. As a teacher committed to the continual development of his pedagogic skills, Stephens completed professional summer workshops at the Eastman School of Music, Westminster Choir College, and with Los Angeles vocal coach, Lisa Popeil, on the pedagogy of contemporary commercial technique and vocal styles (Voiceworks Method).

Dr. Stephens has presented his creative research at conference sessions for the National Association for the Study and Performance of African American Music, College Music Society (Great Plains Region), International Congress of Voice Teachers, International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, and the African-American Art Song Alliance. He is also affiliated with the Center for Black Music Research, Afrocentric Voices in Classical Music, National Association of Negro Musicians, and continues to be an active member of the National Opera Association and NATS.

Caroline Helton, soprano, joined the voice faculty at the University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre & Dance in the fall of 2000. An artist who enjoys the entire gamut of classical singing, from opera and oratorio to recital and chamber music, she has been described as displaying “masterful” artistry and a “clear, bell-like soprano.”

Highlights from Dr. Helton’s performances include a program in May of 2011 entitled “Voices of the Holocaust” at New York’s Museum of Jewish Heritage, in which she and pianist Kathryn Goodson performed repertoire from their 2009 CD of the same name. Along with UM faculty Stephen West, baritone, Chad Burrow, clarinet, Andrew Jennings, violin, Diana Gannett, double bass, DMA student Pia Greiner, cello, and the composer at the piano, Helton performed the New York premiere of Paul Schoenfield’s *Ghetto Songs* on the second half of the program. Dr. Helton also sang Alberto Ginastera’s rarely performed *Cantata para América mágica* for soprano and percussion orchestra with the UM Percussion Ensemble conducted by Jonathan Ovalle, as part of the Ginastera Festival presented by the University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre & Dance in December of 2011.

A longtime NATS member and a passionate teacher and advocate of diversity, Dr. Helton began her collaboration with Dr. Stephens during his DMA studies at the University of Michigan. In master classes, group discussions, performances, and publications they have explored the pedagogic benefits and challenges of crossing the race barrier when performing art songs and spiritual settings by African American composers in recital. Other areas of research and performance include music

of Jewish composers whose lives were affected by the Holocaust. In addition to their 2009 CD, *Voices of the Holocaust* (recorded on the Block M record label and currently available on iTunes), Drs. Helton and Goodson recently recorded a second CD of vocal music by the Italian Jewish composers Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco, Vittorio Rieti, Leone Sinigaglia, and Guido Alberto Fano, whose lives and careers were irrevocably altered by the Holocaust. Given that many of the pieces on

this disk have not been previously recorded, the CD (whose release is planned for the fall of 2013) will represent an important addition to the discography of lost music by Jewish composers from the interwar period.

Dr. Helton is an Associate Professor of Music (Voice) in the School of Music, Theatre & Dance as well as an Associate of the Frankel Center for Judaic Studies at the University of Michigan.